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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [KDEM](#) [VE](#)  
SUBJECT: WHAT'S WRONG WITH THE OPPOSITION?

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Classified By: POLITICAL COUNSELOR ROBIN D. MEYER,  
FOR REASON 1.4(D)

¶1. (C) Summary: Both President Chavez and the opposition are gearing up for the National Assembly (AN) and community council elections anticipated in the last half of 2010, although the Chavista-packed National Electoral Council (CNE) has not formally announced the dates. The opposition claims it has learned its lesson from the lack of unity in the November 2008 state and local elections that cost them several dozen seats, and has spearheaded a "unity table" effort to create consensus on everything ranging from women's issues to electoral candidates. Nevertheless, in conversations with opposition officials over the past few weeks, it appears that the parties remain stubbornly committed to their own self-interest and are unable to come up with a message or programs to appeal to the disaffected Chavistas whose support they need to win elections. End Summary.

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The Problem of Uncertain Timing and Undefined Voting Districts  
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¶2. (C) The CNE has told political parties and Poloff that AN and town council elections are unlikely to be held until the last half of 2010. However, under the new electoral rules, the CNE has no constraints on the specific timeline leading up to the balloting. Chavista AN Deputies have told Poloffs, however, that they fully expected, and needed, the traditional three-month long campaign period. The uncertainty about the timing of the elections, exacerbated by conflicting media assessments and predictions, has contributed to the opposition's disorganization and lack of sense of urgency. The electoral strategist for Primero Justicia (PJ), Juan Carlos Caldera, told Poloff October 26 that the parties did not want to publicly discuss electoral specifics, including candidates, until after the CNE announced the electoral timeline and new voting districts. The CNE is widely expected to use its authorities under new Electoral Process Law (LOPE) to gerrymander voting districts to favor Chavez's United Socialist Party of Venezuela (PSUV). Opposition party officials say it is difficult to negotiate candidacies when there is so much uncertainty regarding the district boundaries. With extremely limited financial resources, the parties say they are hesitant to spend money on extensive polling or primaries without a firm idea of where candidates will be running.

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THE UNITY PROBLEM  
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13. (C) Party leaders have repeatedly listed to Poloff the several dozen gubernatorial and mayoral seats in November 2008's elections that they lost because multiple opposition candidates ran for the same seat and split the vote, allowing the PSUV candidate to win. Nevertheless, "Un Nuevo Tiempo" (UNT) representative Yenny De Freitas told Poloffs September 24 that the four major opposition parties were not supporting the concept of a "unity ticket" because doing so would not allow them to measure the parties' individual electoral strength -- the future basis for negotiating how many candidates a given party should run. (Note: The "unity ticket" would require all candidates to run under a single opposition banner, rather than as candidates representing individual parties. End Note.) Some parties officials have also expressed concern that by not running their own candidates, the parties risked losing their party's legal registration ("personalidad juridica").

14. (C) PJ international coordinator, Mary Ponte, told Poloff October 13 that running opposition candidates under a single banner would be "confusing" to the electorate and asked, "what sense does it make after all this work that the parties have done?" PJ officials have repeatedly attributed the interest of smaller opposition parties in a "unity ticket" to those parties own weakness, suggesting that they were trying to either undermine or piggyback on the four principal opposition parties. Former Mayor of Chacao Leopoldo Lopez, who split with UNT over his support for a "unity ticket," told Polcouns October 16 that the parties are too comfortable with the status quo to take risks. He also rejected the idea that there were "major parties," arguing that within the opposition, "all the parties are small parties."

15. (C) As an alternative to a "unity ticket," the four  
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major opposition parties have advocated for achieving a "perfect alliance" ("alianza perfecta"), in which opposition parties would agree on the same slate of candidates and run under their own party names.

16. (C) The opposition's disagreements over the method for selecting its candidates (either for a "unity ticket" or "alianza perfecta") have been widely publicized. Some have argued for the party leaders to select candidates primarily by consensus and using the results from the November 2008 elections as a framework -- a non-transparent process that others criticize as a throwback to "old school" politics. Others suggest that local polls of potential candidates should guide the party leaders' decision-making, although critics of this method argue that individual polling would be prohibitively expensive given the limited resources of the opposition. Still others, including most prominently former Chacao Mayor Leopoldo Lopez (see below), advocate a single national primary to select candidates. PJ and UNT have publicly announced that the selection process would involve all three methods (polls, primaries, and consensus), depending on the particular circumstances of the state or locality. However, opposition Podemos leader Ismael Garcia, claiming to speak in the name of the unity table, announced October 25 that the table had "not discarded any method for selecting candidates."

17. (C) Opposition party members have privately trumpeted their "unity table" initiative. Ponte said that each commission, attended by at least a dozen party representatives, meets on a weekly basis. She pledged that unlike previous opposition alliances, it is a serious effort and not simply a space for political grandstanding -- hence it has sought to keep press attention to a minimum. Ponte admitted, however, that many of the smaller or regional parties in the opposition are not participating -- a serious flaw if the parties want to achieve the "perfect alliance" on AN candidacies that they claim to be seeking. She said that Lopez had not attended the meetings since the table's

inception and probably neither had the former student leaders in his movement, many of whom gained fame for their role in the 2007 protests against the closure of Radio Caracas TV (RCTV). In an October 21 conversation with Poloffs, opposition electoral strategist Gabriel Matute discounted the unity table as no different than previous unity efforts that were purely alliances of convenience for the sake of winning seats.

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THE MESSAGE PROBLEM  
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18. (C) Journalist and electoral expert Eugenio Martinez told Poloffs October 15 that the unity table has developed nothing in the way of a detailed legislative platform or agenda to present as an alternative to Chavismo. He said it was extremely difficult for opposition parties, which cross the ideological spectrum, to find consensus on even basic policy issues. He said there is little creative thinking being done to exploit areas where the GBRV is weak, namely Venezuela's spiraling crime rates. So, while they are adept at eloquently attacking Chavez's legal transgressions and governance failings, they have not constructed a coherent message that will attract votes outside of the opposition's current narrow base. PJ's Juan Carlos Caldera pledged that the unity table was working on a common legislative platform, but said the message to voters would be that the AN should act as a check on Chavez -- a message that is unlikely to resonate except among the opposition's base. (See septel for more on opposition messages.)

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THE LOPEZ "PROBLEM"  
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19. (C) Former Chacao Mayor Leopoldo Lopez has become a divisive figure within the opposition, particularly since his very public split with UNT in September. He is often described as arrogant, vindictive, and power-hungry -- but party officials also concede his enduring popularity, charisma, and talent as an organizer. PJ's Ponte said she had worked for Lopez when he was mayor and was impressed by his ability to organize his staff and effectively implement programs. Nevertheless, she said he summarily fired her when her husband opposed Lopez during an internal party conflict while he was still a member of PJ. (Note: Lopez co-founded PJ but left the party to join UNT in 2007. End Note.)

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110. (C) Lopez is administratively disqualified to run for office until 2014. He told Polcouns October 16 that he was optimistic he would win his legal case before the Interamerican Court of Human Rights (IACHR) against the disqualification, but acknowledged that the GBRV would not likely recognize any Court ruling in his favor and suggested its key significance would be as a warning to other "Bolivarian" governments (Bolivia, Ecuador, Paraguay, Nicaragua) against taking similar actions against their political opponents.

111. (C) Without any near- or medium-term electoral prospects, Lopez has focused on an effort to create "social networks" ("redes populares"), a grassroots structure that offers a social and political alternative to Chavismo. Lopez said he is focusing on extending them to nearly all of Venezuela's 23 states. If he is successful, Lopez would become both a necessity and a threat to the opposition parties, whose aggregate party membership is less than 10 percent. While the parties need Lopez's following to expand their narrow electoral base, they appear frustrated with his uncompromising approach and do not trust his motives. Ponte said that for the opposition parties, Lopez draws ire second only to Chavez, joking that "the only difference between the two is that Lopez is a lot better looking." PJ's Caldera

minimized Lopez's "social networks" as "political proselytizing" and his projects as no different than those often carried out by opposition parties trying to build public support.

¶12. (C) Lopez told Polcouns that he has a "different vision" for how the opposition should operate in Venezuela than the opposition parties. His "social networks" operate largely by focusing on small but emblematic projects that incorporate community leaders regardless of political affiliation, often working with community councils ("consejos comunales"). For example, Lopez mentioned a pilot plan in Barquisimeto, Lara State, that uses architecture student volunteers and donations from local businesses to fix up a house for a single resident who was chosen as "most needy" by the neighborhood. Lopez has also published slick, color pamphlets of different sections of Caracas, with photos and interviews of local residents and examples of the local projects being done by the "social networks." He assessed that 20 percent of the participants in his programs are PSUV members. Lopez said his goal was not publicity, but building credibility with the Venezuelan public by focusing on small social improvements. With this support, he hoped to create a political movement.

¶13. (C) Lopez's vision for the opposition also includes a different electoral strategy. Lopez said he would not launch a party until after AN elections since it made no sense to create a party while advocating for a "unity ticket." He is currently advocating that opposition parties hold a single national primary to select its candidates as the best way for the candidates to develop grassroots legitimacy. Lopez said the major elected opposition figures -- Governors Perez Vivas (Tachira), Pablo Perez (Zulia), and Henrique Capriles Radonski (Miranda), and Sucre municipality Mayor Carlos Ocariz -- had all privately told him that they favored a "unity ticket," but all but Perez Vivas were still hesitant to publicly endorse the idea.

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COMMENT  
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¶14. (C) The opposition parties all regard next year's AN elections as decisive to the future of democracy in Venezuela. However, they face considerable challenges in overcoming election timing and rules that President Chavez will dictate to favor his candidates. They face an even greater challenge to overcome their internal rivalries and to articulate a message appealing to disaffected Chavistas.  
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